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THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

DELIVERED ON TUESDAY, DECEMBER 28, 1920, AT POUGH-
KEEPSIE, NEW YORK, AT THE THIRTY-SEVENTH
MEETING OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

BY JOHN M. MANLY

NEW BOTTLES

[After some introductory remarks, the speaker proceeded as follows:]

Let us first recall very briefly certain well known facts in the history of the Association. The Association was founded thirty-seven years ago for the advancement of the study of the modern languages and their literatures. Looking back upon its career and accomplishments, the critical historian must pronounce that a very large measure of success has attended it. There has been a steady and gratifying growth. The membership is now more than sixteen hundred and includes probably a majority of the scholars in the United States actively engaged in the advanced teaching of the modern languages or literatures. The publications from an annual volume of nearly one thousand pages—an expansion which has not been accomplished by any lowering of the standard of quality. Scarcely an important publication on any subject within our field appears in any part of the world that does not acknowledge some measure of indebtedness to the *P. M. L. A.* The Association has, indeed, not only been the principal agency

in the United States in promoting research in subjects belonging to its wide field, but has recently had the honor of citation among the causes which have led to the organization of the new Research Association in England. Moreover it has done notable work both directly and indirectly in establishing good methods and high standards for the teaching of French and German in the United States and in keeping instructors in touch with one another and with the progress of scholarship.

With this fine record of achievement, it may seem presumptuous to suggest that the Association ought carefully and thoroughly to consider whether its aims cannot be better fulfilled by the adoption of some entirely new methods and of some changes in the old ones. But it is just because I have been a member of the Association for more than thirty years and am proud of what it has accomplished that I wish to provoke this inquiry. In the effort to avoid qualifications and conditional statements I shall undoubtedly tend to become too positive or dogmatic, but I beg you to believe that I have no wish to impose upon the Association any particular system of ideas, but only to suggest as strongly as I can the desirability of an enlargement of its aims and methods and to give definiteness to the suggestions by proposing some definite plans for consideration. If the Association shall decide that these plans are unwise or impracticable, I shall bow to its decision—especially if other and better means of accomplishing the purpose of the Association shall be proposed by others. My contention is only that—much as the Association has accomplished—the time has apparently arrived when it can profitably attempt to do more.

In the field of research we see that everything has been left to the individual members. Not only has there been no attempt to direct the investigations, there has been

equally no attempt to bring together in any special way or for any special purpose members who were working on subjects closely related or capable of being made of mutual service. This was natural in view of the highly individualistic character of the period when the Association was organized and was perhaps the only method of bringing together what was originally a comparatively small body of persons interested in very diverse branches of the same general subjects. But the result has been that although the *Publications* contain hundreds of valuable and some very notable contributions to many subjects, there are no great outstanding accomplishments in the field of scholarship that can be placed to the credit of the Association. No one great author or period has been fully studied; no great text or body of related texts has been edited; no problem of literary history or criticism has been made the object of concentrated and consistent study. In saying these things I do not forget that some of the best work of our generation on Chaucer and Shakspeare and Milton and others has appeared in the *Publications*, or that useful texts have been published, or that there have been many thoughtful critical papers and discussions of the principles of criticism and of literary history. The point I am trying to make is that the general impression produced by a survey of our work is that it has been individual, casual, scrappy, scattering; that if we needed financial support for some important undertaking and were asked to justify our appeal by reference to what we have done, we could not point to large, unified achievements, we should be obliged to rely upon a multitude of minor contributions, and we should find our work unified only under the subject headings in the valuable Index to the *Publications* recently issued.

Perhaps it is necessary or desirable to continue to

operate in this unorganized way. But this age is increasingly one of specialization and of organization for the accomplishment of purposes too large for a single investigator. No doubt there are fewer problems in our fields of study that can be profitably attacked by organized coöperation than there are in chemistry or physics or botany or astronomy. But there are some such, they are important, and there is little doubt that if we once begin to consider the possibilities of properly organized coöperation, we shall soon find plenty of problems—some perhaps which could not be solved in any other way.

In order to be specific and to make a beginning I will suggest a few. Others of equal or perhaps greater importance and interest will doubtless suggest themselves to you as I speak.

First let us consider the problem of American speech. This is no doubt properly the special concern of the American Dialect Society, but the relations of that society to the Modern Language Association justify us in considering its problem as one of our own. It has long been recognized that a linguistic survey of the United States is a problem too vast for any one investigator, and the Dialect Society was organized for this very reason. Among the members of the Society are all the leading experts in American dialects and many competent observers. But although the Dialect Society has existed for some twenty years and has published many interesting contributions to our knowledge of the subject, it has scarcely made a beginning toward a complete and satisfactory survey. The reasons for this are clear. The work has been too casual, has lacked intensity and continuity of effort. The officers, for all their skill in organization and all their labor—and I can testify that they have labored faithfully and intelligently—have never been able to secure the intensive and

prolonged coöperation which alone could bring success. The fault has not lain in the officers of the Society, but in my opinion solely and simply in the fact that they were not able to hold out to their fellow-workers any prospect of large and immediate results, and few of the laborers were able to retain their enthusiasm for a long struggle toward an indefinitely distant end. If the Society had had the membership and the money which would have justified them in saying, "We can and will make and publish in ten years a practically complete survey of American English, including dialects local and vocational, colloquialisms, foreign influences, together with a study of foreign speech islands and their effects upon the nation," I believe that a host of willing observers and critics could have been drafted for the work and kept in it and abundance of financial support could have been secured from practical business men and others who appreciate the importance of the problems of our common speech. It is not yet too late for such a program. Indeed now more than ever—since the war has made clear to the Government and to every public spirited citizen the fundamental importance to our institutions and our civilization of the English language—it ought to be comparatively easy to secure adequate financial support for a study of American speech, provided the plan is sufficiently comprehensive and thorough and its promoters can promise results in a reasonable time.

Another task—or rather set of tasks—which ought to be undertaken by competent organizations of scholars, and which must be undertaken soon if it is ever to be done at all, is the recording of the languages all over the world which are vanishing before the advance of modern civilization. Scientists and missionaries and travelers have of course made studies of many of these languages. In India,

under the auspices of the Government, Mr. Grierson and his associates have made a marvelously complete and accurate survey of the multitudinous dialects spoken in the Indian Empire. But there are still many important languages in all parts of the world of which our records are woefully incomplete or inaccurate; and the time will soon come when they can no longer be studied in their uncontaminated forms, if at all. To make a careful and scientific study of even the simplest language is no doubt a long and difficult task for even a properly trained observer, but it would seem that it would not be a difficult or enormously expensive task to obtain phonographic records of traditional tales and songs and common forms of the most important of these languages by the aid of teachers and missionaries coöperating with a comparatively small number of experts who could give them training in making the records. Even in our own country—and therefore of special interest to us—it seems likely that unless special effort is made, the picturesque and musical dialects of the negroes of South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana, and the Creole dialect of the whites of certain districts of Louisiana will soon be known only by imperfect phonetic transcriptions or even by the misleading representations of them in dialect stories.

Of course I am aware that neither the Dialect Society nor the Modern Language Association has at present the organization or the means to undertake such extensive and expensive projects, but some of them are of vital interest to both organizations; and it seems probable that if we could make a beginning—if we could point to definite achievements of these kinds—we could obtain the financial support we should require. For language is a subject of universal interest. Everyone discusses its phenomena at

some time and in some form, everyone theorizes about them, everyone wonders how language originated and why we speak as we do. And many of the problems of language—genetic and psychological—will never be solved until we have a larger collection of specimens and have devoted to them a broader and more intensive study.

The cynical among you are still objecting that such undertakings cost money and that while money is being poured out in large sums for research in physics and chemistry and metallurgy and botany and every other branch of the physical sciences, this support of research is due to the fact that business men see immediate practical returns from the development of these subjects. That it is easier to obtain money for subjects of this kind is true, but it is very far from being true that men and women of large wealth are interested only in subjects that pay in money. They are interested in any subject that awakens their imaginations by its significance for the large problems of human history and destiny. Astronomy has for many years obtained large sums for the equipment and support of the most subtle and recondite researches. No doubt astronomy has many practical uses, but it is not these which have enabled it to obtain the funds it needed; it has won by its appeal to the imagination of men. We of the humanities have been too reticent, too lacking in human fellowship. We too have stars in our firmament, systems as mysterious and fascinating as comets or double suns, but we have too seldom invited the public to look through our telescopes and share our visions of the strange and interesting processes by which the chaotic chatter of anthropoid apes has been organized in the wonderful fabric of human speech or their formless outbursts of emotion have after many centuries issued in lyric and drama.

But there are other tasks, less ambitious but of great importance, which we may well undertake while we are perfecting our plans and obtaining the funds for these.

In the first place, instead of working as isolated individuals—scattering our efforts as did the monks of the middle ages—we can organize groups for working coöperatively on special topics. The organization of these groups and the bringing of them together for the formulation of plans and the discussion of methods and results might well be one of the most important functions of the Modern Language Association.

Of recent years many persons in various parts of the world have been studying the problems of versification, the basis of rhythm, the perception of time relations, the rhythm of prose, and other related topics. Much excellent work has been done, some of which has been published by this Association. There is little doubt that some of the investigators have devised right methods of attack and created valuable instruments of investigation. But the problems are many; some of them are difficult; some of them require the work of many hands and many minds. There can be little doubt that if all the members of the Association interested in these subjects should come together for the exchange of ideas and the planning of coöperative work, very much more could be accomplished than by working singly—some things perhaps which could be done only in this way. And surely it would be both more profitable and more interesting for them to meet for such planning and discussion than to listen to papers on a dozen other subjects, of which they have little special knowledge.

There are many other topics which would profit by intensive coöperative treatment. Perhaps in this way we

might hope to work out an annotated text of Chaucer or a critical text of Shakspeare. Certainly in this way we could learn more than we now know of the culture of the Middle Ages, of the psychology of composition, of the conditions of literary productivity in different countries and ages; we might even reach some sound and well-based knowledge of the extent to which literature really is a function of the spiritual life of a nation; or at least we might for the first time in the history of the world formulate accurate conceptions and clear definitions of the critical terms which are used daily by writers of all classes with such lordly carelessness.

If I may express my idea without reservation, I shall add that I think provision should be made both in these special groups and in our public meetings for those members of the Association and of the public who are not interested in research but none the less care for literature in a large and intelligent way. There are many such, and among them are some of our ablest and best scholars and teachers. Scholarship does not consist entirely in what is commonly called research. The man who has done only enough research to know its methods, its difficulties, the kinds of results which may be accepted with confidence and the kinds which however probable must always remain speculative, will, if he keeps abreast of important discoveries, if he has a sound knowledge of what other men have done and are doing, and if he brings to this knowledge taste, good judgment, insight, and philosophic breadth, be a better scholar as well as a more interesting human being than any research worker, however industrious and ingenious, who lacks these prime qualities.

Let us then find a place, a place of honor, in our organization for all those who study literature in any large and

sincere and intelligent way. And let us, when in our own research we have discovered anything, not carry it off and hide it to play with, but bring it out into the public square and talk with our fellow-men about its meaning, if it has any.

To carry out such plans would involve some modifications of the programs of our meetings, but the changes would not be hard to make and would probably result in a renewal of interest in the meetings and greater vitality in the papers and the discussions. Our programs are now, I take it, largely the result of accident. A certain number of members offer to read papers on certain investigations brief enough to come within the conventional limits of fifteen or twenty minutes. If not enough papers are offered, the Secretary utters a cry of distress that is heard from one coast to the other and the devoted members cudgel their brains to think of some topic insignificant enough to be adequately treated in the allotted time or some larger topic that can be presented in outline. When the offerings are all in, the Secretary prepares his lists of sheep and goats—of papers to be read and papers to be read by title. The papers for each session are—no doubt purposely—entirely heterogeneous, giving every listener some topic of which he knows something, to repay him for sitting through the three or four others of which he knows little or nothing. Discussion is rare, and usually brief and perfunctory—almost never vigorous and profitable.

If in a dozen or more rooms we had small groups of members actively devoting a whole session—or even all the sessions of the meeting—to different phases or parts of some topic in which all of them were keenly interested, we might make the meetings of the Association even more influential than they have been in the promotion of

research. And if the leaders in various lines of research would aid in organizing and planning problems and methods of solution, there is a possibility that attendance upon the meetings would be greatly increased. Such group meetings could easily provide for discussions more thorough, more technical, and if necessary more informal than is now permissible. Provision could equally be made for discussions of a more popular and discursive character—discussions of critical theory and practice, reports on notable additions to our knowledge or on other matters of interest to us as teachers rather than as investigators. Publication might be made by summary report, by outline, or by complete text, as the case might require.

For some subjects of permanent interest there would doubtless be more or less permanent groups holding sessions at every meeting of the Association. For less important topics or topics of transient interest groups could be organized upon application to the Secretary. The arrangement of the program would be a complicated task, but it would be well within the powers of the Secretary.

There are other ways in which it seems that the Association could promote research if it cares to organize itself for this purpose. Many scholars are deterred from undertaking researches or are hampered in completing those they have undertaken by the difficulty of procuring necessary materials—books that must be consulted, copies of manuscripts that must be used. Thanks to the liberal administration of university, public, and private libraries, it is now possible for a scholar to procure through his home library the loan of almost any book that is accessible in this country—though there are some scholars who do not know this. But the problem of procuring exact copies of manuscripts or rare books in libraries abroad is puzzling

to many of those who have not studied abroad or do not maintain correspondence with foreign scholars. It might be well to consider whether, alone or in coöperation with foreign societies, the Association could not arrange to supply this service to its members.

Perhaps the greatest handicap under which American scholars labor is the impossibility of completing certain investigations without spending some time in foreign libraries. Not a few important contributions to literary history are, after many years of labor, still incomplete, because their authors have not been able to spend enough time abroad. Most of these authors have spent considerable sums in these undertakings; some of them could, with the aid of a comparatively small subvention, complete their work promptly, instead of letting it drag on for years. Unfortunately the Association has no funds to aid in research or in the publication of research. But there is plenty of money in the world for the endowment of research if we can only get at it, and it would come to the Association if it were commonly known that the Association needed funds for such purposes and could guarantee that the expenditures would be wisely and properly made.

The individual scholar—even if he has the temperament which allows him to urge his own claims—is rarely able to secure financial aid for prosecuting a research or photographing important manuscripts or publishing important texts. Patrons who are not experts in philology and literary history have no means of judging the relative values of plans proposed by individuals; many of them know by bitter experience that expenditures for what seemed to the lay mind—under the spell of professional eloquence—undertakings of the highest merit, have been scornfully criticized by experts as wasted on unworthy

subjects or objects; some of them know that even letters of recommendation from prominent scholars are not a complete guarantee of the worth of a proposed undertaking. The Modern Language Association, acting through a more or less permanent committee of experts, sensible of its responsibility to the Association and to the public for choosing not merely worthy objects but the most worthy, could soon establish in the minds of patrons of learning confidence in its recommendations and assurance that no funds entrusted to it would be unworthily or carelessly applied.

The main reason why the Association has never formed plans for large undertakings is that its officers are, in theory if not in practice, not perennials but annuals. Appointed for a single brief term they feel no responsibility for the remote future and limit their thoughts to plans for the term only. Probably the president and vice-presidents, as useless and purely ornamental figures, should be appointed for terms of one year only, but the real control of policies should lie in the hands of a body of greater permanence. The executive committee should consist of members elected for long terms and not more than one-third of them should go out of office at one time. The Secretary too should be in theory, as he has been in fact, a permanent officer and should perhaps be *ex officio* chairman of the executive committee. Only by a permanent administration that feels its responsibility for the development of the Association will large and far-reaching plans be devised; only by a permanent administration that has shown its vision, its soundness of judgment, and its sense of responsibility will the confidence and coöperation of generous patrons be secured.

There is, as I have repeatedly remarked, plenty of

money in the world, and the men and women who control it are ready to give it freely for visions—visions of all kinds—visions of food for starving peoples, visions of wider opportunities for cramped lives, visions of astronomical discoveries, or of excavations of long-buried civilizations, visions of dead poets and painters and lawgivers, visions of man in every stage of his long climb up from his feeble and brutish beginnings. Of course the rich need some one to help them see these visions. But there are many men who can so help them; there are some such in our own Association and it is our business to find them. Most of us can do but little, because our eyes are fixed, not on the great and wonderful building we are helping to rear—the structure of human evolution, the complete record of man's struggles and defeats and successes, of his dreams, his plans, his battle cries, his songs to celebrate his triumphs or banish his faintness or drown his despair—but upon the single stone each of us is shaping, the brick he is molding for the building. Doubtless the stonecutter must keep his eyes on the stone, and the brick-maker his on the brick; but the public will not give money for stones and bricks unless it too is allowed to see the plans for the building. Each of us who are at work on the details has his own picture—if not of the completed building, at least of the part on which he is at work. We could hardly labor as we do if we labored in complete blindness; and yet too often we are disappointed, resentful, scornful, if the public, which has never seen the drawings for our building, is not greatly interested in the size and shape and number of the bricks we have made. The building is the thing, the palace of art, the structure of the intellectual evolution of mankind; let us show them the palace, or at least find the showman.

No doubt this is all a dream, but it is a dream that we can make come true, if with belief in and enthusiasm for it we will labor to realize it—not today, nor perhaps tomorrow, but on the morrow's morrow.

To recapitulate briefly, I propose that we consider carefully the desirability of three changes in the policy and practice of the Association:

- (1) A reorganization of the meetings with a view to greater specialization, and greater stimulation of research;
- (2) The working out through carefully chosen committees of plans for important investigations and for methods of aiding individual investigators;
- (3) The establishment of the Association in the knowledge and confidence of the public with a view of making it a still more important source of influence and knowledge.